



AETC News Clips

Randolph AFB, Texas



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Air Force Band gives a patriotic, commanding performance

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Inside Howard Hall at Lackland AFB the conductor, clad in a battle dress uniform, raised his baton as 45 musicians held their instruments at the ready awaiting his signal.

Standing on a wooden gray platform, he cued the musicians for their first selection, "The Christmas Festival," a medley of yuletide melodies.

"Let's try to get that warm sound," he said. "Lock it in time immediately when you get there."

Maj. Dean Zarmbinski, commander of the United States Air Force Band of the West, was seeking precision. It's the same precision that has thrilled presidents, heads of state and audiences around the world for 64 years.

Sunday the Concert Band will continue that tradition at the first of three annual Holiday in Blue concerts at Trinity University's Laurie Auditorium starting at 3 p.m.

Monday and Tuesday the concerts will begin at 7 p.m.

Admission is free and there are still tickets available, at the Lackland tickets and tour office, for Tuesday's concert. However, anyone without tickets will be seated 15 minutes before each concert.

Nancy Gonzales, news anchor for KSAT-12's "Good Morning San Antonio" will be the master of ceremonies for the concerts. This year's theme is "Through the Eyes of a Child," and performances will feature a range of Christmas standards.

The holiday series is part of the band's long tradition of performing in Alamo City's arts community, which includes "Fiesta in Blue," a staple of Fiesta every year.

It's also part of their mandate as musical ambassadors, promoting military heritage through patriotic and wide-ranging music.

The band was established Oct. 1, 1941, at Moffett Field, Calif. It arrived at what would become Lackland in March 1947 and was reassigned as the 539th Air Force Band on Sept. 26, 1947.

The band plays three types of performances: official military events, and change of command and retirement ceremonies.



Helen L. Montoya/Express-News

Staff Sgt. Alex Serwatowski, who plays tuba, rehearses with the band Thursday.

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The concert band is the largest ensemble within the organization. The songs range from symphony pieces to Broadway music to Top 40 tunes. The musicians perform at military bases and communities across Texas, Louisiana, Arizona and New Mexico, logging 10,000 miles a year. They load and unload their own equipment and have two full-time audio technicians.

"We're more than a marching band," Zarmbinski said. "The only way we're able to do this is with the skill and ability of these folks. This is their way they serve their country, through the music."

The life of a military band member extends beyond the bright lights and stage.

The musicians invest three or four hours preparing for every hour performing.

They audition live or by tape. They play a set list of songs and if they make the cut, they're guaranteed a job upon completing basic training.

Airman 1st Class David Evans, who plays trumpet, is the newest member, having completed basic training Nov. 4.

He sat in the rehearsal room the first time in August 2004. He wore civilian clothes for the 3 1/2-hour audition that tasked him mentally.

Evans, 23, who graduated from Angelo State University, is like all the other members who have years of musical education. Unlike their military counterparts, they don't have a technical school; they're expected to walk in the door trained. Many are pursuing higher-education degrees. Ten of the band members have master's degrees, 18 have bachelor's degrees and three have associate degrees.

Chief Master Sgt. Benny Pelphrey has spent five years of his 27-year career touring with the band. "We have the opportunity to go around the world entertaining civilians and troops in remote sites in the middle of nowhere," said Pelphrey, 45. "It's great to see different types of people and represent the Air Force."

Two weeks ago Zarmbinski led the band through several rehearsals for the Christmas concerts. He called for changes, and cautioned against playing a millisecond behind the melody, things an audience would never notice.

He nodded in approval as the sound of piercing woodwinds melted into booming trombones. Clashing cymbals rang and the single ping of a metal triangle accented the adjustments.

"This will be one of these magic moments," Zarmbinski said, slowing the band with the palm of his left hand and a flick of his baton.

Their quest for creating inspiring sounds is in line with the unit's motto: "Per aures ad animum," through the ears to the spirit.

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